



# A Coherent Spirituality Without The Supernatural ?

## *Looking in the Distance*

Richard Holloway,  
Canongate, Edinburgh 2004.  
215 pages. £12.99. ISBN 1841955353.

This book is the companion volume to Bishop Richard Holloway's *Godless Morality*.

In that book he described an ethical framework constructed from our human experience on this Earth (as far as most of us understand, the only one we have). In this book he addresses a related concern: whether a coherent spirituality is possible without reference to supernatural forces.

For this reviewer he has succeeded admirably, especially considering that this is a short book (215 pages of text, on small pages). The book has a minimum of references and endnotes, but many germane quotations, including a large number of poems. I found them very well chosen, and often moving.

The four sections are entitled **Looking, Speaking, Listening**, and what was for me the best of all, **Leaving**.

In 'Looking', Bishop Holloway meditates on the amazing world in which we are all immersed, and describes how he now takes the world full on, without any urge to explain what cannot be explained, especially by traditional religion. He quotes the poet Hafiz that:

**The Great Religions are the Ships  
Poets the life Boats.  
Every sane person I know has jumped  
Overboard...**

Holloway says 'we may be no closer to understanding why there is a world, but we are now able to accept the fact that the world itself is the source of the values and meanings we prize most, not some hypothetical transcendent reality which did none of the work yet claims all the credit. One way to express this is to say that the spirit is now engendered by and encountered in the world in which we find ourselves. Rather than positing an external force to account for our most cherished experiences, we begin to understand how they were generated within us in response to the life process itself.'

In 'Speaking', subtitled 'Telling Tales', Holloway looks to literature to express the truths of the human condition, and begins to formulate an active and creative response to the reality he finds in which we are immersed. He says, 'The fact that we are now on our own makes it all the more imperative that we reach out to one another 'sometimes hand to hand'.

'Listening' is provocatively subtitled 'Playing it by Ear'. In this section he explores what our religious traditions have to tell us, and says we must go beyond what has been given us by the past if we are to meet the urgent challenges of our moment. For a flavour of what you will find in this rich meditation, one section is entitled 'We confuse preferences with morality'.

The last section was for me the richest, and alone worth the price of the book. 'Leaving' is subtitled 'After all'. In it Holloway talks about how an old man considers his death. There is nothing formulaic in his thoughts, and for this reviewer, who is just about his age, his thinking about how we might approach death is wonderfully clear, honest, and unflinching.

You have probably already surmised that I am deeply grateful to Holloway for writing this book. It is very much a practitioner's book, one that would probably not pass scholarly muster. But his practice is that of a wise and compassionate priest and minister, someone who has lived long, and has much to say. I think any local Sea of Faith group would find much value in reading this book together; you will be in the presence of a wise, loving and compassionate sceptic. I find this a landmark book for religious humanists.

***David Rush***

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